

WITHERSPOON OF GIFFORD AND AMERICAN PRESBYTERIANISM

BY THE REV. A. L. DRUMMOND, B.D., Ph.D., S.T.M.

ON the slopes of the Lammermoors, at the edge of fertile East Lothian, lies the pleasant parish of Yester. The village of Gifford, laid out by the laird in 1710, is an admirable example of pioneer planning.¹ The broad main street leads up to Yester Kirk, T-shaped, Dutch-looking; clear glass fills the round-headed windows and a well proportioned tower is crowned by a steeple. On the wall of the manse garden, opposite the kirk, is a bronze bust of a divine in gown and bands, with this arresting inscription:

IN HONOURED MEMORY OF THE REV. JOHN WITHERSPOON, D.D., L.L.D.,
THE ONLY CLERGYMAN TO SIGN THE AMERICAN DECLARATION OF
INDEPENDENCE, THE FIRST MODERATOR OF THE PRESBYTERIAN
GENERAL ASSEMBLY IN AMERICA AND PRESIDENT OF PRINCETON
UNIVERSITY.

BORN IN THE MANSE OF YESTER, FEBRUARY 5, 1723.

ERECTED BY THE ST. ANDREW'S SOCIETY OF THE STATE OF NEW
YORK, 1955.

Americans have certainly done justice to Dr. Witherspoon as national hero and Presbyterian leader. His *Collected Works* were published at New York by Dr. Ashbel Green in 1801.² Two American biographers³ have concentrated on his trans-Atlantic career, with emphasis on Princeton. No Scotsman has recorded adequately his important ministry in his native land, before his departure to Princeton in 1768.⁴ An American post-graduate was awarded a Ph.D. by Edinburgh University in 1935 for an able thesis, *John Witherspoon, his Scottish Ministry*.⁵

¹ The scheme was initiated by Rev. J. A. Cowley, M.A., a son of the neighbouring manse of Pencaitland.

² Edinburgh Edition, 1804 (9 vols.).

³ By D. W. Woods (1906), V. L. Collins (1925). The latter *Life*, by the Secretary of Princeton University, is well documented. More recently Dr. H. W. Dodds, President of P.U., has written *John Witherspoon* (containing his letters). The Library of P.U. has published *John Witherspoon comes to America*.

⁴ Brief but excellent tribute by the late Dr. Mitchell Hunter, "John Witherspoon in Scotland" (Presbyterian Alliance *Register*, xii, 1923).

⁵ Unfortunately the late Dr. W. Oliver Bracket did not publish his work.

The life of Witherspoon falls naturally into two phases—as an eminent minister of the Church of Scotland before 1768, and as a prominent leader of the new American nation in Church and State, till his death in 1794.

I

John Witherspoon was born in the manse of Yester (Gifford) on 5th February 1723, the son of the Rev. James Witherspoon and Anna Walker. The manse has been replaced but the kirk remains much as it was (three lofts, narrow pews, canopied pulpit). The village was far in advance of the average Scots hamlet of that era. As a boy John saw the turf on the banks of the Gifford Water being used as a drying-green for the new "British Linen Company" (whose transactions are now confined to banking). The spirit of progress redeemed the village from stagnation. The minister's stipend of £100 p.a. put him in a more comfortable position than many a lesser laird. John Witherspoon was educated at Haddington Grammar School, where Latin plays were still performed—a fact worth noting in view of his subsequent tirades against the stage. The associations of Haddington with Knox seems to have accounted for a tradition that Witherspoon was descended from the Reformer—this is *non proven* and he never claimed it.

John went to Edinburgh University in his thirteenth year. Unlike many students of that time, who lodged in garrets up foetid closes, he boarded with youths of good family in a comfortable Lawnmarket house. Among his companions was Alexander Carlyle ("Jupiter"), who in later life described Witherspoon as an unattractive youth—

"Far advanced for his age, very sensible and shrewd, but of a disagreeable temper and awkward manner . . . This defect stuck to him when he grew up, roused his envy and jealousy, and made him take a road to distinction very different from that of his more successful companions."

Carlyle's impressions, persisting in print, have certainly injured Witherspoon's reputation.¹ Prejudice also distorted his account of visits to Yester Manse.

"We passed the day in fishing, to be out of reach of his father, very sulky and tyrannical, but who, being much given to gluttony, fell asleep early, and always went to bed at nine, and, being as fat as a porpoise, was not to be wakened, so that we had three or four hours of liberty every night to amuse ourselves with the daughters of the family."

¹ *The Autobiography of Dr. Alex. Carlyle of Inveresk, 1722-1805* (T. N. Foulis, 1910), pp. 34, 53, 72, 105.

This sketch of a rotund Epicurean was a caricature. The Rev. James Witherspoon preached before the Lord High Commissioner in 1742 and was appointed a King's Chaplain in 1744. He was a strict Calvinist, steeped in the writings of the classic Huguenot divines, whose sermons moulded his pulpit style. To his son he communicated the gift of tongues.

John was more active and enterprising, but it would have been better for him, had he learnt to relax sometimes, like his father. He reacted too violently against his easy-going fellow-students at Edinburgh. Such men as John Home, Hugh Blair and William Robertson (afterwards prominent Moderates) might have corrected his faults, and *vice versa*. They might have broadened his provincialism by their culture, and he might have deepened their shallowness by his evangelical convictions; but contact merely intensified mutual antipathy.

Scholastic Calvinism won few adherents in the Divinity Hall, as Professor Goldie droned his way through Pictet's *Compend of Theology*. Such dessicated dogma inclined alert students like John Home to turn aside to the more attractive pastures of ethics and *belles lettres*. But John Witherspoon kept to the beaten path of orthodoxy, while cultivating a clear, incisive style in writing Latin and English. As graduation at Edinburgh was lapsing into desuetude, Witherspoon and four other students (including Hugh Blair) had to earn an M.A. by printing and publicly defending theses (23 Feb., 1739). Witherspoon's thesis (*De Mentis Immortalitate*) was sustained and duly dedicated to his father's patron, the Marquess of Tweeddale. Good for a lad of sixteen!

Licensed by the Presbytery of Haddington in 1743, he remained with his father at Gifford, till presented to the parish of Beith, Ayrshire, where he was ordained in his 22nd year (April 4, 1745). The Earl of Eglington allowed four candidates to preach, appointing the one who received most votes; men of rank voted for Muirhead, men of piety for Witherspoon.

Soon after his ordination the Presbytery of Irvine sent a resolution of loyalty to George II, occasioned by the outbreak of the '45 Rebellion. Ministers were invited to raise volunteers for the Duke of Cumberland. Witherspoon led some of his parishioners to Glasgow, but they were told to go home. He decided to see something of war as a spectator. He witnessed the battle of Falkirk but was captured by the Jacobites with many others and imprisoned in "a large ghastly room" on the battlements of Doune Castle. Among his fellow-prisoners was John Home, former fellow-student and future foe as dramatist. The prisoners made ropes of their blankets; seven descended from the battlements in moonlight, but Witherspoon decided to wait and see what happened. He was released

soon afterwards and returned home to Beith. The Presbytery made no comment on this picturesque episode, but added his name to a committee appointed to transmit to the Duke of Cumberland the Presbytery's resolution of loyalty. For many years he kept the Doune Castle exploit to himself. This repression seems to have resulted in a nervous reaction, causing loss of self-control, irrational fears and inability to concentrate.

A few years, however, saw his balance restored. In 1748 he married Mary Montgomery of Craighouse (near Beith). They had ten children, of whom only five survived to accompany them to America in 1768. His ministry at Beith had prospered. An Evangelical, he was as advanced as any Moderate in advocating improved roads and agriculture. It was their easy-going attitude to religion that he censured. They were "moderate in ability, showing a moderate degree of zeal, and doing a very moderate amount of work." These tests were applied in Witherspoon's *Ecclesiastical Characteristics*. No wonder that influential clergy were incensed by this satire and endeavoured to prevent his Call to Paisley being sustained by the Presbytery. However, he was eventually inducted to the Laigh Kirk on 16th June, 1757. His name had been presented by the patrons (the Town Council and magistrates), ratified by heritors, elders and seat-holders. The Presbytery objected to his views, but were legally bound to moderate a Call.

In 1700 Paisley was a clutter of hovels, housing 200 indwellers. They made a poor living by spinning yarn to supply 87 handloom weavers, who sold stuff at the cross to English pedlars. By 1786 Paisley was a thriving town of 22,000; narrow wynds and dirty folk had given way to well-paved streets and well-clothed citizens. This transformation was well under way on Witherspoon's arrival in 1757. The townspeople appreciated his clear, forceful, Bible-centred preaching, as well as his parochial diligence and business ability.

On one occasion he was asked to arrange the funeral of Bailie Robert Fulton. This involved considerable expense in meals and "mourning garments." Witherspoon and the Town Clerk stood surety for £98-16-1; but when the estate was settled, the beneficiaries refused payment. The minister and Town Clerk went to law; they were awarded all that they had spent, with interest. Witherspoon was less successful in the Snodgrass case, which he mishandled to his own hurt. Snodgrass was a young Paisley lawyer, much given to tippling. He and his companions in a tavern one Saturday night (February, 1762) made irreverent references to the Lord's Supper. The minister magnified the affair in a special sermon. The presbytery found some of his allegations unfounded. This encouraged Snodgrass to sue his minister for criminal libel (£100 damages, and £100

costs). The case dragged on till 1776, Snodgrass eventually won, but failed to damage Witherspoon's reputation in Paisley; indeed, local unpopularity drove Snodgrass to Glasgow. Witherspoon continued the traditional parish discipline; it was "strict, regular and impartial" and commanded the close co-operation of the civic authorities.

Witherspoon was a born controversialist. His former fellow-student, the Rev. John Home of Athelstaneford, wrote the drama of *Douglas* (1756) which was acted in Edinburgh and witnessed by Moderates like Alexander Carlyle. *Douglas* was acclaimed in London—a patriotic Scot turning to an Englishman, asked, "Whaur's your Willie Shakespeare noo?" Witherspoon reacted violently by writing *A Serious Inquiry into the Nature and Effects of the Stage*. He afterwards took part in the Assembly debate. His argument carries little weight nowadays, being based on traditional puritan prejudice rather than on the results of practical contacts with players and the playhouse.

Much more significant was the part he played himself in ecclesiastical controversy, as leader of the Popular Party against the high-handed exercise of patronage in presentation to "livings." In the earlier 18th century, respect was generally paid by patrons to the preference of parishioners when a vacancy was filled; "a Call" from the congregation was considered vital. But as the Moderate party tightened its hold on the General Assembly patrons tended to pay less attention to local critics. When Witherspoon first became a member of Assembly there were ten "disputed settlements" (1747). In the Torphichen case, the Presbytery refused to act and were rebuked at the bar of the Assembly; a "riding committee" was appointed to carry through the ordination by force. In 1751 Robertson marshalled an Assembly majority of 93 against 65, in favour of disposing Gillespie of Carnock. Gillespie, founder of the Relief Church (offering frustrated congregations relief from patronage) was joined by Thomas Boston, Jr., who had been refused induction to the Crown living of Jedburgh, in spite of his support by congregation and magistrates. Witherspoon was well aware that the Relief and Secession bodies thrived on disputed settlements and steadily gained adherents (numbering 100,000 by 1766). Yet he did not consider that dissent offered a true solution to the problem. He did his best to organise the Popular Party in the Assembly.

The Moderates, however, were aided by several factors, material and immaterial. The Assembly of 1750 had asked Parliament for augmentation of stipends (had the Kirk not helped the House of Hanover against the insurgent Jacobites?). Parliament said in effect: "Obey the Law which guarantees the rights of patrons and you will get your increase of stipend"!

Further, economic progress made for higher standards of life ; laymen craved more freedom for recreation. The Moderates offered relaxation of the rigidly puritan discipline, which had been almost unchallenged during the economic stagnation of the early 18th century. They also catered for men who were weary of dogmatism and thirsted for the springs of humanistic philosophy opened by writers like Shaftesbury. Paganised Christian divines extolled Socrates and Plato, while they spoke patronisingly of the Apostles. The same fashion prevailed at Geneva, where mundane waters muddled the pure fount of Calvinism.

In 1753 Witherspoon launched a thunderbolt at the Moderates. It was an anonymous satire, published at Glasgow. The title, *Ecclesiastical Characteristics*, was adapted from that rationalist manual, Shaftesbury's *Characteristics* (1711). He dedicated the work to a departed Moderate minister, claiming the same liberty as Swift, who dedicated his *Tale of a Tub* to "Prince Posterity." If ghosts haunt places in which they once delighted, the ghost of a departed Moderate surely haunts the General Assembly. He purveys maxims for the benefit of the present generation. They are based on policy, not principle. Let a parson please his patron and his pressing problems will be solved. Let sleeping dogmas lie. Maxim VI reminds us that short cuts to knowledge are by no means novelties. "Each year gives us a shorter method of learning some branch of knowledge . . . the quintessence of everything has been extracted and is presented to us in little phials. . . . As to Poetry it will be sufficient to read *The Tragedy of Agis* (by John Home) if it be published. . . . It is believed, by the author's friends, there never will be a tragedy published after it, unless by somebody delirious."

Instead of the Athanasian Creed, the authors offer "The Athenian Creed," showing "what a moderate man ought to know and believe."

"I BELIEVE in the beauty and comely proportions of Dame Nature, and in Almighty Fate, her only parent and guardian ; for it hath been most graciously obliged (blessed be its name) to make us all very good.

I BELIEVE that the Universe is a huge machine, wound up from everlasting, and consisting of an infinite number of links and chains, each in a progressive motion towards the zenith of perfection . . . that I myself am a little glorious piece of clockwork, a wheel within a wheel, or rather a pendulum within this grand machine, swinging hither and hither by the different impulses of fate and destiny : that my soul (if I have a soul) is an imperceptible bundle of exceedingly minute corpuscles much smaller than the finest Holland sand. . . .

I BELIEVE that there is no ill in the Universe, . . . that those things vulgarly called *sins* are only *errors* in the judgment, and foils to set off the beauty of Nature, or patches to adorn her face ; that the whole race of intelligent beings, even the devils themselves (if there be any) shall finally be happy ; so that Judas Iscariot is by this time a glorified saint. . . .

In fine, I believe in the divinity of L. S. [Lord Shaftesbury], the saintship of Marcus Antoninus, the perspicuity of A——e [Aristotle] and the perpetual duration of Mr. H——n's [Hutchison] works, notwithstanding their present tendency to oblivion. AMEN."

Ecclesiastical Characteristics caused an immense sensation. This anonymous *jeu d'esprit* appealed to current taste, which appreciated a show of engaging simplicity and innocent candour. Its accuracy hit the Moderates in their weak spot—their sensitiveness to ridicule. It exposed their gentlemanliness as sycophancy, their culture as paganism, their virtue as self-righteousness. They were discredited as "hollow men" (to apply T. S. Eliot's metaphor). Satire won more friends for the Evangelicals than heated denunciation. The orthodox, hitherto armed with archaic weapons, equipped themselves with the modern armaments of their adversaries.

Successive editions of the *Characteristics*¹ drew fire from the pilloried parsons. "A satire that does not bite," said the anonymous author, "is good for nothing." The publisher kept his secret well. Witherspoon had the reputation of being an austere man, not gifted with a sense of humour. For some months no one suspected the heavy-handed, sour puritanical controversialist. Witherspoon defended the satire without acknowledging authorship. Only after three years was the identity of this "Great Unknown" revealed.² Witherspoon became a national figure. He did not please all orthodox circles—was this pamphlet in good taste? Was satire a legitimate weapon in religious controversy? He replied: such arguments were once levelled against Pascal's *Provincial Letters*, but now, these "ironical, witty papers are not counted against Pascal's piety." Did Witherspoon not display party spirit? He replied: "Some persons by 'party spirit' mean a person having different principles from themselves."³

¹ *Editions*: 1754 ("corrected and enlarged"), 7th Edition, 1767; *Final Edition*, 1842. A Dutch translation ran into 10 editions.

² The *Bradford Edition* (Philadelphia, 1767) was the first to put Witherspoon's name unequivocally on the title-page.

³ "Why I was accused of being the author of *Eccl. Characteristics*," a speech before the Synod of Glasgow (*Works*, viii, 246-75)

Our adroit apologist failed to repeat the success already scored in his sequel, *A History of a Corporation of Servants*.¹ This allegory is somewhat in the style of Swift, reminiscent perhaps of Voltaire's *Micromegas*. He demonstrated that the clergy in church history had a black record as the Lord's stewards: he did not turn, however, to pertinent chapters that revealed the Church as "a bad employer" (a phrase coined by a good layman in our own days). The *Corporation of Servants* fell flat, and no wonder; the modern reader soon tires of "heavy jesting." The author was discouraged by his failure to arrest Moderate ascendancy, despite his temporary triumphs. The Moderates continued to expatiate on Virtue, Liberty and Benevolence. It seemed as if "the spirit of the age" had superseded the Holy Spirit. Not till the French Revolution demonstrated the failure of Deism and humanist idealism, did the Evangelicals begin to regain lost ground by their proclamation of Grace, Conversion and Holiness.

Witherspoon's discerning eye and sagacious judgment were respected by noble adversaries like Principal Robertson. Unfortunately his pungent manner gave needless offence in the General Assembly; he lacked the geniality of fellow-Highflyers like Dr. Webster of the Tolbooth, who did not allow party loyalty to interfere with personal friendships. Yet Witherspoon's views were not extreme, judged by the standards of his day. In his Scottish ministry, he was no doctrinaire democrat. He did not seek to abolish lay patronage; he was content to mitigate its abuses by seeking the assurance that every presentee should be generally acceptable, through a Call being signed by a majority of heritors, elders and heads of families.

Witherspoon could count on considerable popular support among the rank and file of the laity. An effective preacher, he declined important calls from Dundee, Dublin and Rotterdam. St. Andrews University, centre of Moderatism as it was, honoured him with a D.D. in 1764. When he removed to America in 1768 his enemies asserted that he had "made Scotland too hot for himself." It would be truer to say that he was leaving a stage that he had outgrown. He was destined for a wider sphere than Hanoverian Scotland, where independence and enterprise were not the qualities encouraged by Church and State.

II

WITHERSPOON IN AMERICA, A LEADER IN CHURCH AND STATE.

In November 1766 the Trustees of the College of New Jersey met to select a new President. Buildings had been erected at Princeton in 1754.

¹ *Collected Works* (Edinburgh, 1804), Vol. vi.

while funds were being collected in Britain. Although two great Americans, Jonathan Edwards and Samuel Davies, had served as President, the College had not prospered. Might not an eminent Scotsman give them the necessary impetus on the road to making Princeton an equivalent to Harvard and Yale? Although Witherspoon's name had become known as an ecclesiastic rather than as an educationalist, Richard Stockton, as a College trustee, was asked to visit Paisley. He found Mrs. Witherspoon resolutely opposed to this trans-Atlantic adventure, despite his assurance that Princeton was the cheapest place for living over there. Mr. Stockton found her husband's outlook insular ("he is without any Tolerable idea of America"). Dr. Witherspoon declined. Mrs. Witherspoon, having gained her point, weakened after a further call from Dr. Benjamin Rush of Philadelphia. The offer was renewed and accepted in 1786.

After ordering a cargo of books, etc., in London, the Witherspools reached Philadelphia in twelve weeks. On landing, they received an ovation and proceeded to Princeton. Nassau Hall, the main building, was illuminated with tallow dips in their honour. It seemed an elegant, serviceable edifice—a contrast to "our tounis college" in Edinburgh, which then resembled "rows of dilapidated almshouses." The Doctor could hardly have approved of the chapel organ; and in the village church he missed the 1200 to 1500 attentive hearers that attended the Laigh Kirk, Paisley, every Sabbath. His accent most Americans found unfamiliar, but he soon justified the opinion expressed by Somerville of Jedburgh: "There were few more weighty speakers in the Church courts . . . he never failed to produce a strong impression." In America his voice was destined to produce notable results in spheres secular as well as sacred.

His first task was re-organise the College of New Jersey as its sixth President. His attitude was empirical rather than speculative. His aim was to provide a liberal education rather than a specialised curriculum that "narrowed the scope of the mind." He introduced the Scottish lecture system, to replace the "Recitation" hours spent on "quizzes" based on assigned texts. He did not believe in students taking notes which they could not assimilate; he would therefore stop to ask them questions in class or to explain points that they raised. Further, he enlivened his prelections with epigrams. "Lads, if it should fall to the lot of any of ye . . . to appear upon the theatre of public life, let me impress upon your mind two rules in oratory—'Ne'er do ye speak unless ye ha' something to say, and when ye are done, be sure and leave off.'" Such methods and maxims hit the target and appealed to the common sense and humour of his American hearers.

The meagre resources of the College, however, required strenuous extra-mural activity on his part. Like many academic Presidents of to-day, he had to spend much time in travel, raising funds amongst wealthy supporters and making contact with potential students. Not many strangers in America would have been successful in this exhausting task of promoting the interests of Princeton, but Witherspoon adapted himself to the novel situation ; he won the approval of the self-perpetuating trustees for his resourceful, enterprising spirit. He soon made friends with Virginian planters, who entertained him with lavish hospitality. The Lees, Madisons and Washingtons recognised the advantages of a college within reasonable distance of the South. He on his part made it clear that he prepared students not only for the Presbyterian ministry but for public life. Such was James Madison, destined to become fourth President of the future United States. Ten of Witherspoon's students became Cabinet ministers and twelve, State governors ; sixty were elected to Congress ; and three were appointed Judges of the Supreme Court.

Before looking ahead to examine the results of his collegiate work, we must look backwards, to take stock of the religious condition of the North American colonies when Witherspoon arrived in 1768.¹ The early 18th century witnessed the consolidation of Congregationalism into " the standing order " of the relatively compact New England provinces. A miracle had happened. A voluntary body in old England had been transformed into a State Church across the Atlantic. The Church of England had entrenched herself officially in the South and in New York (captured from the Dutch). Indeed, Lord Cornbury, Governor of New York, in 1706 tried to silence Francis Makemie, pioneer Presbyterian. Makemie, a young Scot born in Ulster, founded the Presbytery of Philadelphia and corresponded with Church leaders in Scotland, with a view to extending the Kirk across the Atlantic. This was timely activity for by 1740 half the population of Ulster (Presbyterian, land-hungry, individualistic) had emigrated to escape grinding poverty and Episcopal persecution. A number of ministers came over from Scotland and Ireland, arriving sometimes with lax doctrine as well as lax character. In 1729 American Presbyterians passed the Adopting Act, applying the Westminster Standards to ensure basic orthodoxy. Hitherto, dissensions had been mainly due to the infiltration of liberal theology. The revival preaching of Whitfield and Edwards, while adding to the number and zeal of Presbyterians in New York, Pennsylvania and the South, caused fresh dissension. The " New Side " believed that the necessity of evangelising

¹ See my *American Protestantism* (Oliver & Boyd, 1949), pp. 115-76.

a new land rapidly filling up with immigrants justified new methods. The "Old Side" insisted on academic qualifications and correct procedure in Church courts. In 1741 the Synod of New York (New Side) split from the Synod of Philadelphia (Old Side). During seventeen years of separation the New Side reaped the fruits of the Great Awakening under Jonathan Edwards. The College of New Jersey was founded by the New Side, Edwards himself being President for five weeks before his death. When the Old and New Sides were re-united in 1758, Princeton was hailed as their bond of union. The arrival of Witherspoon ten years later sealed their reconciliation. He was a pronounced Evangelical and yet stood fast for thorough academic training in Arts and Divinity.¹ It was a distinct advantage to plant in strategic Princeton a distinguished Scottish Churchman who was untrammelled by loyalties to any trans-Atlantic "Side," Old or New.

Witherspoon was fortunate in his unique opportunity of starting life afresh in a new continent. He left behind him the frustrating problem of Patronage, which might have become an obsession had he lingered longer in Scotland. As an educator and organiser, he acquired new experience, fresh vitality for leadership. By the end of his life he could boast with legitimate pride that a decided majority of the General Assembly had been his students. He was a tower of strength to the Presbyterian Church, which was expanding rapidly (a late-comer on the American scene, it was not yet outstripped by the Methodists and Baptists). Witherspoon's activities were varied. He co-operated with David Brainerd in the founding of schools for Red Indians. He promoted a Presbyterian Ministers' Widows' Fund. He interviewed ministers from Scotland and Ireland seeking admission to colonial charges. He negotiated with the Congregationalists of New England (then as Calvinistic as the Presbyterians) to keep a vigilant eye on the threat of English Bishops being imported—a danger finally averted by the American Revolution. He was the spokesman and correspondent of the Presbyterian Synod in manifold issues.

He thoroughly identified himself with the land of his adoption. He noted the contrast between the welfare of plain folk in America and the meagre diet, rags and hovels of Scotland. In the Colonies he became aware of the blessings of representative government: in Scotland the M.P.'s of thirty counties were elected by an oligarchy numbering about 2000 voters. He had never taken much notice of politics at home, except in

¹ Dr. Charles Chauncy of Boston wrote to President Stiles of Yale College: "We are highly pleased that he has come over to the Jersey-College. . . . He is no friend to the tenets of Mr. Edwards, which have been almost universally imbibed in that part of the country."

their economic bearing. When American rights were challenged by Britain soon after his arrival, he listened to the case of the colonists. He said little but carefully examined the issues. As soon as he was convinced that the Colonial cause was just, he embraced it (more resolutely indeed than most American-born college Presidents). In conjunction with Dr. John Rodgers of the First Presbyterian Church, New York, he organised "The Sons of Liberty," commonly known as "The Presbyterian Junto."

After political experience in New Jersey, he was elected a member of the Continental Congress at Philadelphia. His celebrated "nick of time" speech was not quite as decisive in making history as was once asserted. His alleged outburst that America "was not only ripe for independence but rotting for the want of it"¹ is apocryphal. Nevertheless he was one of the nine Scots who signed The Declaration of Independence, and the only clergyman among the 56 signatories.² It is to his credit that he protested against the reference in the original draft to "Scotch and foreign mercenaries" as the backbone of British aggression, and to the undignified abuse of George III as personally responsible for the crisis. Little did he imagine during the '45 Rebellion that he himself would eventually join rebels against "the illustrious House of Brunswick."³ In Scotland he was criticised as a turncoat, though his old friend, Dr. John Erskine, stood up for him. Hugo Arnott, in an anonymous pamphlet (Edinburgh, 1776) satirised him as "Dr. Silverspoon." One of the doughtiest loyalists in New Jersey, Dr. Odell, Rector at Burlington, assailed him as a traitor :

I've known him seek the dongeon dark as night
Imprison'd Tories to convert or fight ;
While to myself I've hummed in dismal tune
I'd rather be a dog than Witherspoon.

Dr. Ezra Stiles of Yale, in no friendly spirit remarked : "The Doctor is a politician."⁴ He was more than a politician. He was a statesman on a national scale. From June 1776 till November 1782 he was a member

¹ L. F. Benson, D.D. : "What did Witherspoon say?" (*Journal, Presbyterian Historical Socy.*, Philadelphia, 1915-16, vol. viii, p. 241ff).

² J.W.'s influence was decisive in securing as the spear-head of American Independence the earnest, active body of Irish Presbyterians who had immigrated for freedom as well as fortune ; the old country for them meant only memories of economic pressure and religious persecution.

³ Anti-Scots propaganda made the most of Lord Bute's autocratic attitude to America, but he fell from power as early as 1763. In 1776 J.W. cleared himself of charges that he was secretly British in sympathy (*Address to Natives of Scotland residing in America*).

⁴ M. C. Tyler, *Literary History of the American Revolution* (1897).

of Congress. He served on the Board of War and on the Committee of Secret Correspondence. His knowledge of French (dating back to Gifford days) proved an asset in negotiating an alliance between the United States and the government of Louis XVI. His close study of economics, starting at Paisley, expanded in America when a new nation gave him broad administrative experience. His realistic maxims were heard with respect, e.g., "No business can be done, some say, because money is scarce: it may be said with more truth, money is scarce because little business is done." He attended Congress in gown and bands, as Roman Senators wore the toga. He applied the Presbyterian theories of republicanism to the new civil government. Actually the Federal Constitution synchronised with the Presbyterian Constitution (1789). Witherspoon is thus numbered with the Founding Fathers of the United States—Washington and Jefferson, Franklin and Adams.

The American Revolution threatened to shatter the College which President Witherspoon had made prominent on the academic map. Before the War of Independence he had 150 students in residence and 80 "Latin scholars" (schoolboys)—including "young gentlemen of the first fortune from almost every province and the West Indies." Witherspoon rode off to Congress in June 1776, leaving Professor Houston and two tutors in charge. By 18th November the American troops were in full retreat across New Jersey. Princeton was exposed to the British advance, and as a centre of rebellion was subjected to rough treatment. The students had already left; most of them enlisted, taking to heart Witherspoon's words: "When liberty, prosperity and life are at stake, we must not think of being scholars but soldiers."¹ Not till 1782 did the academic authorities regain possession of half-ruined Nassau Hall. When the absentee President returned to Princeton, he found a meagre enrolment of students, an empty exchequer and bleak prospects.

After the Peace Treaty of 1783 acknowledged the independence of the United States, Witherspoon agreed to visit the old country to solicit funds, along with General Reed of Pennsylvania. "British coin had built Nassau Hall in colonial days; it could rebuild it." But circumstances were utterly different; Witherspoon's usual common sense failed to function. Was it reasonable to expect the British public to repair losses for which the American rebels were themselves responsible? Dr. John Erskine warned him that it was "utterly imprudent" to set forth

¹ Among J.W.'s *Sermons on Interesting Subjects* is one from Acts 17, 6: "These that have turned the world upside down are come hither also" (*Works*, vol. v). When Lord Cornwallis surrendered at Yorktown, the band played the march, "The World turned upside down."

on such an expedition without consulting old friends. The Rev. Charles Nesbit of Montrose considered: "Had he come to encourage emigration—well and good, but to come from plentiful America, Mecca of poverty-stricken Scots—this was undignified, unseasonable." However, he assured the Doctor that he would be free from personal insults in Scotland. Witherspoon wisely confined his visit to personal friends. Nor did he stir the embers of old controversies in Edinburgh, where his fellow-student, Dr. Robertson, was now Principal of the University. Moderatism was still ascendant and closely allied to Tory patriotism. After several months in Scotland Witherspoon sailed for New York in July, 1784; on the voyage he lost an eye owing to an accident on board.

The President of the College of New Jersey never realised his dream of "Funds, Faculties and Facilities." By the time of his death in 1794 the College had not yet recovered from the effects of War. His rigid Calvinism failed to immure students in "intellectual dormitories." The French Revolution popularised the works of Voltaire¹ and Paine. Financial prospects were poor. Nevertheless, the foundations were well and truly laid. Dr. Witherspoon left a band of disciples eager to continue his unfinished work, future Presidents like his son-in-law, S. S. Smith, and his favourite student, Ashbel Green. The Evangelical Revival in the early 19th century supplied men and money abundantly. The College advanced further under Dr. James McCosh.² The Presidential Succession of Presbyterian clergy continued unbroken till 1902, when Woodrow Wilson, a minister's son, headed the College of New Jersey, known as Princeton University since 1896. Dr. Wilson, President of the United States in a new era, blended academic lustre with statesmanship, like his predecessor at Princeton a century earlier. Witherspoon would have rejoiced further to know that his own staunch Calvinism had been transmitted even into the 20th century, by the foundation of Princeton Theological Seminary in 1812. It continued to function as the fortress of orthodoxy long after its former ally, New England Congregationalism, surrendered to the seductions of liberalism. The theological climate of Princeton has become more genial in recent years, though the Reformed theology is still proclaimed in essentials.³

¹ J.W. encouraged his students to read "both sides." He introduced French Literature into the College curriculum—including Voltaire.

² Note the curious parallel between Witherspoon and McCosh. Both were Lowland Scots, Edinburgh graduates, foes of Moderatism. Both came to Princeton as President (August, 1768, August 1868). Both spent the last 26 years of life there, one dying on Nov. 15, 1794, the other on Nov. 16, 1894. Seldom has academic history repeated itself so completely.

³ In our own days Scots professors, e.g., G. S. Hendry and N. V. Hope, have added lustre to Princeton like their predecessors.

Dr. Witherspoon was outstanding neither as a theologian nor as a preacher. An American contemporary described him as "an intolerable, homely old Scotchman with a marked *burr*." He would have won more hearts had he not scorned completely the social graces of the Moderates. He had as few flowers in his sermons as in his garden. He lacked that sentimental, oratorical afflatus that stirs American audiences. "He had matured too soon to see visions: and if he dreamed dreams he was too matter-of-fact to relate them."¹ Yet he won the respect, even affection of students who called him "the old Doctor." His ascetic Puritanism, which had repelled young folk in Scotland, was somewhat relaxed in the sunnier climate of America. His sense of humour, so sardonic in the days of *Ecclesiastical Characteristics*, became more kindly, despite a gruff exterior. He learned by experience that it was better to overlook what he would have condemned as frivolous (and exaggerated) in Scotland. Thus he ignored the activity of a dancing-master who settled at Princeton. He took no disciplinary action against the producers of the Rev. John Home's tragedy, *Ormisande and Alonzo* in the prayer hall of the College, during his absence at Congress. In 1782 Nathaniel Lee's *Rival Queens* was performed, Ashbel Green (the future divine) distinguishing himself as Alexander the Great. The "old Doctor" also dealt indulgently with student escapades,² which, in his Scottish ministry he would have severely reproved. The maxim of his maturity was magnanimous as well as shrewd: "Govern always, but beware of governing too much."

His belief in the manifest destiny of a new nation did not prevent him from criticising persons who degraded the English language by the introduction of "improprieties and vulgarisms." The *New English Dictionary* confirms his claim to have coined the word "Americanisms." He quotes such specimens as "improve" (in the sense of "use"), "tote" for "carry," and "mad" for "angry." Any success that he attained in life he modestly attributed to his Scottish education and churchmanship.

He was to a large extent the architect of the American Presbyterian constitution. Various colonial *nuclei* were re-shaped and consolidated to form a Church national in scope. Although a loyal minister of the Church of Scotland, he did not recommend an "established" status for Presbyterianism in the United States, although there was talk of "concurrent

¹ Varnum L. Collins, *President Witherspoon* (vol. ii, 189).

² A characteristic episode: J.W. was soaked with a basinful of water, which a student playfully intended for a comrade emerging from a door. The President looked up: "D'ye see, young man, how ye ha' wet my new coat?" That was all. The offender became a devoted admirer.

endowment " for the leading denominations. New England Congregationalism remained " the standing order " for a generation after Witherspoon's death, because it stood fast for American Independence ; whereas the Anglican Establishments in Virginia and the Carolinas fell, because the clergy were Tories. Witherspoon realised that establishment was inappropriate for a new country. His committee for revising the Westminster Confession decided that the civil magistrate should "protect the Church of our common Lord, without giving preference to any."

The leadership of Witherspoon secured the adoption of the Westminster Standards, with slight modifications. He preached at the inauguration of the first General Assembly at Philadelphia (May 1789). The Scottish Model was faithfully followed (*mutandis mutatis*). This occasion was the climax of his ministry. Had he lived longer than 1794, he would have had good cause to criticise certain developments in American Presbyterianism that broke needlessly with Scottish tradition, such as the gradual disuse of the metrical psalms, gown and bands.

Dr. Witherspoon looked forward to *otium cum dignitate* at Tusculum, his farm near Princeton. Patriarchal retirement was unfortunately impaired by *res angusta domi*. The last ten years of his life were made difficult by property losses due to post-war economic circumstances over which he had no control. These misfortunes a grateful nation might easily have repaired. Mrs. Witherspoon died at Tusculum, aged sixty-eight. She seems to have settled down in America better than she expected; little is recorded of her. But the elderly widower set off early one June morning in 1791 for Philadelphia to marry a lady much younger than himself. He stopped at Trenton for breakfast. His host, the Rev. Dr. Armstrong, glancing at the family chaise drawn by four horses (called to higher service from the cart or plough), remarked : " Doctor, you do not seem to be well matched." The bridegroom jumped to the conclusion that his friend was referring to his oncoming nuptials. " I neither give advice, nor do I take any ! " he snapped, as he clambered into his chaise. Dr. Witherspoon's sense of humour did not respond to the situation. He died on November 17th, 1794.

Tangible memorials keep his memory alive. Tusculum is preserved as a Witherspoon shrine. Princeton has named one of its many academic edifices " Witherspoon Hall." Nassau Hall, where he taught, is restored and contains his portrait by Peale, which certainly intimates his " presence." In Trumbull's famous picture, " Signing the Declaration of Independence," he appears to advantage. Tassie, the Scots cameo-maker, modelled his likeness in 1784.¹

¹ The original matrix is in the National Portrait Gallery, Edinburgh.

There are no less than four heroic statues of Dr. Witherspoon ; the most notable of these is outside the National Presbyterian Church, Washington, D.C., where President Eisenhower (himself a Presbyterian) recently laid a wreath in his honour. At Edinburgh we have only one statue of Knox—in the secluded quadrangle of New College ; but in his case the inscription to Wren in St. Paul's also applies, *Si monumentum requiris, circumspice*. As for Witherspoon, son of the manse of Gifford, not far from Knox's Haddington, we may cite the marmoreal tribute of Professor Norman Victor Hope :

TWO OF THE PILLARS OF AMERICAN CULTURE,
PRINCETON UNIVERSITY AND THE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH,
STAND IN HIS LENGTHENING SHADOW.
